

## LEADERSHIP LEARNING LAB

Our group, "Above the Violence", goal is to assist a community based organization in providing the local youth with safe alternatives to the illegal and/or risky behaviors that they would/could otherwise engage in.

How did we, a group with as many different personalities and styles as we had members, become one cohesive unit? Well, it wasn't always easy or pretty but it was worthwhile. We experienced "Forming" and "Storming" very early on. Nine strangers, each with an opinion or idea, made it even more difficult as we were trying to figure out who was who in the group. We each had different ideas on what was important to do first. Do we gather stats? Define violence? Pick a project? Pick a community partner? YIKES! Over time, we learned each others strengths and weaknesses as well as whose backgrounds and experiences were best suited to the task at hand.

The first part of the process was to gather state and local statistics related to youth violence and those organizations already involved in trying to reduce the amount and severity of said violence. We also defined what youth violence meant to us and what area of it we would like to focus on for our project. We researched and contacted many local and state agencies. We asked lots of questions trying to determine who was doing what, how successful they were and where our strengths as a group could be best utilized. Finding statistics on a protected group (youth) on a topic (violence) that is incredibly broad was very difficult.

Each member of the group was tasked to bring ideas forward in order to get a sense of where everyone stood and what projects/ideas the group as a whole was most interested in pursuing. The following are the top seven ideas that were brought to the table for possible project options:

- Partnering with an after-school program to develop a model that can be used universally
- Develop lesson plans around violence topics such as bullying to be used in classrooms
- Develop a mentoring program at a school
- Develop a video message similar to the 14 year old boy that came out as gay on "YouTube"
- Create a Train the Trainer model around youth violence
- Draft a RFP to attract youth organizations that might have a project idea for us to work on
- Host a one day event such as a field day

We discussed the suggested topics and decided that the best way to figure out where each group member stood was to take a vote. The top two ideas were to create a video and host an event. After additional discussion, the group decided to combine both ideas.

We next determined the group that we were receiving the most reaction and interest from was the Holyoke Youth Task Force ["HYTF"]. HYTF is a coalition of youth-serving non-profit agencies, city and state representatives, and community volunteers interested in creating positive opportunities and a healthier community for Holyoke's youth. The youth branch of the HYTF is the Holyoke Youth Commission (HYC). It serves as the youth expert in the City. They meet with the Mayor and City Councilors throughout the year to keep them apprised of the issues facing the City's youth. They work on issues that they feel affect today's youth from the high truancy/low graduation rates and high pregnancy rates to civic engagement and leadership trainings. Since HYTF already sponsored events that were well attended and fit in with our group's mission, it seemed to be the perfect choice.

Once we decided on the HYTF as the agency we wanted to partner with, we had to figure out what we could do to best help/assist/support them in reaching their goal(s). HYTF approaches youth violence and other risky behaviors from a prevention perspective. They do this by offering pro-social and safe opportunities for teens called Holyoke Nights. These are welcoming, safe, youth oriented events, open to boys and girls 13-20 years old. Holyoke Nights are fun and free activities for teens with a zero tolerance policy for drugs, alcohol and violence. They run from 7:30-11:30 pm which is the prime time when many teens are exposed to drugs, violence, and even gangs on the streets or at house parties. House parties are often hosted by adults, for a profit and offer a place for underage drinking, drugs and gang recruitment.

We originally thought that we would help with the planning and execution of one of their quarterly "Holyoke Nights" events. In speaking with HYTF's Director Rebecca Masters and Event Coordinator Amy Epstein, it soon became evident they had all the help and volunteers they needed for any given event. What they didn't have was money for additional staffing to coordinate more events. Our vision of what we could do evolved from hosting an event to helping them gain funding to hold more events. We now wanted to give them the tools to do fundraising, to become self sustaining and be able to reach their goal of holding "Holyoke Nights" weekly throughout the City. This would in turn provide children with the opportunity to make the choice to remain safe and consistently out of harms way.

We discussed our anticipated presentation using the Logic Model learned. To this end, we defined the "outcomes" of our project. We questioned whether it was "more events" or "more events to help steer kids away from the negative behaviors/locations or "increase events over the next 5 years due to increased funding we assisted with". We felt it was critical to align ourselves with the HYTF to ensure that our vision of an outcome was in line with theirs.

We further discussed the video component and agreed to check with local production companies and agencies for assistance and cost. We would want, however, to potentially get kids involved so that they can experience filming,

editing, etc process. There was in depth discussion as to what the video was to be. Do we create a fundraising video or video of an event? We did know, however, that as long as we have clear objectives of the video and what the message objective is, it would be feasible to do multiple videos with the same footage. The general consensus was that we did not want to make the project so involved that it is not feasible to have a successful outcome within our time constraints.

It was challenging to design a project that filled a need for our community partner that did not require more effort and resources than what they had the capacity to fulfill. Our group vision for the project and how it could be implemented was not always in sync with that of HYTF. We realized early on that we would need to work closely with them in order to design a project that would support their work and not over-burden them. We designated a liaison to communicate with them to help us to bridge the gap of the vision between our group and that of HYTF. This made it easier to design a project that was realistic in scope, meaningful and sustainable. With one person dedicated to developing the relationship and enlisting our partner in a shared vision, we were able to bring a project to fruition.

Our final project intent was to create a fundraising video and an introductory guide of how to bring additional funding into HYTF. With an increase in funding, HYTF will be able to achieve their goals of increased staffing, reach out to more children, further their mission and reduce violence throughout Holyoke. The document we created is a detailed tool that outlines the best practices of successful, non-profit organizations fundraising throughout the country. The document is broken down to create a manageable process that can be implemented easily and quickly. Once in place, it is our hope that it is sustainable. As we create our plan, we considered the possibility that next year's class may continue with and expand on our project. We encourage HYTF to create an RFP to present to LPV detailing how the next class can continue.

Some of the challenges we faced were

- Revisiting certain topics / issues that many of us were under the impression were already "resolved" at a prior session/meeting. One of the ways the group as a whole addressed these reoccurring issues was by being direct, but respectful with each others concerns and why they felt they needed to be revisited. At the end of the meeting, the facilitator or a team member with a more aggressive approach would ensure buy-in from us all by closing with, "So what we agreed on was....Right?" The agreement was documented in the minutes of the meeting and distributed that same day (for the most part) to ensure proper communication.
- Resistance/building trust - After a formal meeting with representatives from the community organization that entailed the team's thoughts, perception and goals relative to the "mission", it seemed as if a vast majority of what was being brought forth was being declined by the community organization. They didn't want the video - they didn't see the value in it. We worked hard to "share the vision" of the video

- and what it could do for them long term. Coupled with a guide on how to use it to build funding and ultimately capacity, the relationship grew.
- Not having the time to develop the relationship with the organization properly limited our team development with our community partner and ultimately limited access to the youth. We didn't understand the danger that exposure would place these youth in, the steps we would have to take to "enter the inner sanctum" of the events, nor the best way to capture the message without creating risks.
  - To say "I'm at a different place, tell me how you got to where you are" - Ingrid's "Suspending Judgment".
  - Getting feedback - It was difficult to get people to do more than just say "Good job" or "it needs work." There was a lack of actual constructive criticism/editing that allowed for actionable changes to creative materials.

We used storyboarding to layout our vision of what the video should look like and what we wanted it to say. The time spent at the video shoot was informative as well as fun for all involved. We were able to witness the interaction and mutual respect between the youth commissioners and the adult member of HYTF. It was clear they were all together because they wanted to not because they had to.

Rebecca Masters greeted us when we arrived with the videographers. She walked us through the area in which we could film as well as checked in with us through the evening on how the filming was progressing. The adult leaders involved in the filming were Amy Epstein (HYTF) and Liz Budd (Greater Holyoke YMCA). They spoke on camera to what Holyoke Nights is, what the benefits to the youth and the City are. They expressed their belief that the program makes a difference and that is why they continue to volunteer their time

The teens willingly spoke to complete strangers, in this case members of Above the Violence and the video team, on why they became involved with Holyoke Nights. What they saw as the benefits to having these events and where they saw things going for their friends and possibly themselves should these events not be available. They freely spoke of friends and peers who are already headed in a direction not conducive to becoming a productive adult member of society. Some who even at thirteen and fourteen are engaging in dangerous and self-destructive behaviors including drinking, drugs and/or sexual activity sometimes resulting in pregnancy. As a testament to how strongly she believes in what HYC is doing, one youth commissioner told us she carries condoms with her to give out to anyone she knows is going to have sex.

In the end, it is our belief that we have reached our goal. We have provided our community partner with the tools to expand the positive impact on the youth of Holyoke and, by extension, the City of Holyoke itself.